Physical and ontological threats to state security: Why returning foreign terrorist fighters elicit certain policy responses from the EU and home governments

Undergraduate Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
with Honors research distinction in International Studies
in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by
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The Ohio State University
April 2021

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Abstract

Returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) present a dilemma for the European Union (EU) and member state governments. Current policy ranges from repatriation, prosecution, discouragement, or even refusal of re-entry of these returnees. Attack-focused language used in such policies indicates that physical threat is the foremost concern of the EU. However, in light of empirical data on violent attacks committed by returnees, there is a *mismatch* between actual threat and the supranational organization's and member states' response. I suggest that other factors, other than simply physical security, are driving the policy-making process. I argue that the responses of Western European states and the EU as a whole are driven by *a sense of infringement upon the identity and agency* of the organization—in other words, the return of foreign fighters represents an attack on the *ontological security* experienced by the state.

In this paper, I first provide an overview of the foreign fighter phenomenon, describing why many of those returning from Syria and Iraq are regarded as foreign *terrorist* fighters, thus eliciting a stronger response from home governments. I then outline the EU's reaction, highlighting the relationship between EU- and member state-level responses. Third, I provide data demonstrating the incongruity between policy language and tangible threat. Finally, I hypothesize that the EU has labeled the return of FTFs an existential security threat that may generate ontological insecurity, or a sense of damaged identity, in the EU, and that this designation has justified policy responses to this group. The recognition of ontological insecurity as one result of the return of FTFs is a crucial factor in a comprehensive perception of EU security responses, and this paper provides a first attempt at such an understanding.

Acknowledgements

I have received the support, encouragement, and assistance of many people during the writing of this thesis and throughout my undergraduate career. First, I would like to extend my gratitude to my advisor and mentor, Dr. Jennifer Mitzen, for her invaluable expertise, constructive feedback, and unending encouragement as I worked through this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Jan Pierskalla and Dr. Jeffrey Lewis for their incredibly insightful contributions as part of my Defense Committee. I am so grateful to have had the chance to work with many additional, amazing faculty and staff at Ohio State. Finally, I would not be where I am today without the help and guidance of my parents and sister, whose endless love and support encourage me to reach for the stars; and my friends, who since freshman year have provided constant light and happiness in my life. I am incredibly thankful for my entire support system—I could not have accomplished this without you.

Introduction

The flow of radicalized extremists returning to their home countries after fighting in conflict zones in Syria, Iraq, and some surrounding Middle Eastern states remains an issue of international importance. In turn, state responses to these returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) have long been evolving. A resurgence in the number of fighters returning to their countries of origin has been seen in the past several years, renewing the debate over policy and bringing into question the efficacy and appropriateness of existing measures that attempt to repatriate, prosecute, discourage, or even refuse re-entry of fighters returning from conflict zones.

Policy responses of home states are reactions to the potential threat posed by the return of FTFs. This paper will examine the physical threat these individuals pose to their Western European home states, and the effects this threat perception has on policy-making in these countries. I focus on the supranational institution of the EU and its member states, which include most of Western, Northern, and Eastern Europe.[1] Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the UK will be highlighted in policy and returnee data analysis. While EU member states are not the sole countries managing the challenges of returning FTFs, the EU is the focus of most foreign fighter data collection because of its relatively high concentration of returning FTFs and its distinguishable policy decisions that have set a precedent for other Western[2] nations in their pursuit of effective, manageable policy in response to the flow of returnees.

Though the phenomenon of foreign fighting—the migration of individuals with the goal of partaking in violent conflict with a non-State group outside of their home country, and often motivated by ideology, religion, affiliation, etc.[3]—is not novel, it has become a subject of heightened international attention since 2011, with academics and security

[1] The United Kingdom (UK) formally withdrew from this union at the beginning of 2020, but for the purposes of the data presented in this study, the UK will be referred to as part of the EU.
[2] The term "Western" refers to the somewhat subjective distinguishment between the cultures and societies of the Western and Eastern hemispheres, roughly. Typically, the West refers to the United States, Canada, Western Europe and in some cases, Latin and South America. Importantly, the Western world remains predominantly Christian (according to Pew Research Center data on the Regional Distribution of Christians published on December 19, 2011), and is distinct from the "East" and the Arab and African spheres.
[3] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Foreign Terrorist Fighters Manual for Judicial Training Institutes South-Eastern Europe*, 3.

officials drawing comparisons from a multitude of historical instances of the same trend in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Somalia, for example.[4] Prior to that year, before the Arab Spring and Syrian conflict prompted a modern wave of foreign fighting, the majority of Western citizens were largely unaware of the recent happenings in this theater. With this new general awareness of conflict in the Middle East also came a more specific interest in organizations such as the Islamic State (commonly known as ISIL or ISIS, which officially declared a Caliphate, a rightfully claimed and historically meaningful territory ruled by and for Muslims, in June 2014)[5] by some Western and Northern Europeans[6] (herein referred to as simply "Western Europeans"), leading to a dramatic and steady escalation in the number of citizens of Western countries leaving their home states to fight with these groups often designated by those states as terrorist organizations.

Estimates of the numbers of radicalized men and women who travel to other countries to carry out jihad, or military action with the objective of expanding or defending the religion, values, and practices of Islam, are becoming increasingly accurate, as more data is obtained regarding fighters' travel to and from conflict zones, as well as death records and MIA notices.[7] Estimates of the number of Western European citizens involved in foreign fighting between 2014 and 2020 range from 14% (5684 fighters)[8] to almost 20%[9] of the 25,000-40,000 total foreign fighters who traveled to Iraq and Syria from over 100 countries since 2011.[10,11] The three largest European countries supplied the greatest number of European fighters, with 1,200 coming from France and 500-600 coming from both Germany and the United Kingdom; however, Belgium and Denmark produced the most fighters compared to their population size: 40 and 27 per million population, respectively.[12]

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[4] Schmid and Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective*, 5
[5] Schmid and Tinnes, 7
[6] The term "Western Europe" encompasses the countries of Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. "Northern Europe" includes Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, and Western Europe. (Enjolras, Bernard. 2018. *Region Report Northern and Western Europe*. Oslo: Institute for Social Research, Norway.)
[7] Cook, *Understanding Jihad*, 2.
[8] Pokalova, *Returning Islamist Foreign Fighters*, 6.
[9] Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s."
[10] Van Ginkel and Entenmann, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union*, 3.
[11] Schmid and Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective*, 6.
[12] Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s."

Approximately 6-23% of EU citizen foreign fighters are converts to Islam.[13] The Middle East region has been the leading supplier of foreign fighters in this conflict, with as many as 11,000 individuals traveling between countries in the area. Much of the additional data collected regarding the personal profiles of FTFs have been inconclusive due to the diverse, dissimilar backgrounds of these individuals.[14]

Analysis of the threat posed by FTFs upon their return is typically addressed by governments in a manner similar to that of more general counterterrorism efforts. Centered around the four pillars of preventing, protecting, pursuing, and responding,[15] the goal is to defend citizens and infrastructure from physical attack. Indeed, in dealing with returning FTFs, most of the focus is placed on the tangible threat of physical attack. This is based largely on the known history of FTFs committing acts of violence both on the battlefield and in terrorist attacks against the countries to which they traveled. There is subsequent concern in home governments that this violent training will continue to be utilized when FTFs return to non-combatant society.[16] However, the violence committed abroad can be described as "soldiers on the battlefield," which is separate from non-combatant society, and thus it is yet unclear whether this physical violence translates into an equivalent threat in home countries.

While concerns surrounding physical attack certainly resonate, there is an apparent overreaction by governments to this potential threat which will be outlined in this paper. I will examine the rationale for focusing on the physical threat posed by returning fighters by analyzing the priorities mentioned and verbiage used in both EU-level and member state-level policy regarding the handling of the return of FTFs. Protection against violence in non-combatant society is central to such policy, but, as I will establish, the policies which have been developed are disproportionate to the prevalence of physical attack perpetrated by returned FTFs. I demonstrate that there are other underlying concerns, perhaps more influential than the threat of physical attack, upon which policy is built. Specifically, this

[13] Van Ginkel and Entenmann, 4.
[14] Van Ginkel and Entenmann, 4.
[15] Van Ginkel and Entenmann, 5.
[16] Bakker and van Zuijdewijn, *Jihadist Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Western Europe*, 8.

study explores the extent to which *ontological insecurity*, or a sense of threatened identity, may be generated in home countries by the return of foreign terrorist fighters and how this insecurity has shaped national security policy responses. I hypothesize that the responses of Western European states and the EU as a whole are driven partly by a sense of infringement upon the identity and agency of the state—in other words, the return of foreign fighters represents an attack on the ontological security experienced by the state.

To demonstrate that a sense of ontological insecurity, or violated identity, is one motivator for policy passed by both state governments and the EU, the empirical basis upon which policy is built will be examined in-depth, specifically addressing discrepancies between the language used to describe the danger of returning FTFs and the extent of attacks actually carried out. This is certainly not to say that there exists no physical threat to the safety of people and infrastructure in the individual's home country. Rather, I am simply examining the empirical justification for these policies in the past few years as the flow of returnees was steady and international visibility of returnees was growing. I will then include a discussion of ontological security, as well as how this concept might be used to explain a state's policies. Effectively investigating the FTF phenomenon and resulting policies from an ontological security perspective may provide insight into more nuanced, successful strategies for addressing future challenges of returning FTFs.

The Foreign Terrorist Fighter Phenomenon

Though the recent surge of returning foreign terrorist fighters has reinvigorated European society's concern over the threat these radicalized[17] individuals pose to their home countries, the phenomenon of foreign fighting and apprehension surrounding the return of these unique combatants is not new. In this section, to more fully explain the scope of the current conflict involving the return of mostly Islamic FTFs, I present a brief overview of recent history in order to clarify the genesis of Islamic extremist groups.

[17] "Radicalization" is defined as the process or progression by which individuals become indoctrinated into extremist beliefs, ideology, viewpoints, etc. (However, just like "terrorism," there is no universally accepted definition.) (Neumann, Peter R. 2013. "The trouble with radicalization." *International Affairs* 873-93.)

Soviet-Occupied Afghanistan

The Soviet conflict in Afghanistan in the early 1980s initiated what is considered the first wave of modern Islamist foreign fighting.[18] Kabul hosted a proxy communist government at the time, and the Soviet Union invaded the country to preserve its holding in 1979. When the issue of defending the Muslim country and its values from foreign invaders was portrayed to sympathizers as a humanitarian conflict, volunteers from nearby countries, initially backed by Islamic charities and later supported and trained by Pakistani *madrassas* (religious schools), traveled to assist refugees displaced by the crisis.[19,20] The legitimacy and purpose of these volunteers were not questioned, since their motivation appeared to be one of altruism, but as it became clear that the initial Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was becoming an occupation, volunteer recruitment[21] angled more toward those who would help in the fight[22] against the invaders, deemed non-believers or *infidels*, over those who desired to provide humanitarian aid in the country.

Networks of fighters, or *mujahideen*, from neighboring nations developed quickly under active leaders, most of whom had received extensive education in Islamic teachings and practices at institutions in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Jordan, and had previously been involved in some way in paramilitary action.[23] These leaders amassed a following by publishing recruitment material stressing the importance of defending one's Muslim family and lands. Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, a prominent facilitator of anti-Soviet jihad, asserted that fighting was "incumbent upon every Muslim today" and that they must "march forward to jihad to aid their Muslim brothers" not only in Afghanistan but "in every place in need."[24] This aggressive rhetoric encompassed the view of many budding jihad*ists* at the time, and proliferation of this mindset was made possible by Islamic religious leaders and foreign support alike.

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[18] Holmer and Shtuni, *Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative*, 3.
[19] Donnelly, *Foreign Fighters in History*, 3.
[20] Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters*, 62.
[21] Donnelly, *Foreign Fighters in History*, 1-2.
[22] This fight is called *jihad*, an Arabic word that translates to "struggle" or "striving" towards a worthy goal, but which has been applied to religiously motivated violence.
[23] Donnelly, *Foreign Fighters in History*, 4.
[24] Quotation from a letter to Azzam from Abdullah Nassah al Waan. Found in Azzam, "Defense of the Muslim Lands."

When Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in early 1989, the call to "every place in need" resonated more immediately with fighters who had traveled to Afghanistan to participate in the struggle. More than 20,000 foreign fighters had arrived during the decade of conflict, most of whom were considered "Arab Afghans," meaning that they hailed from other countries in the Middle East.[25] The true impact of these foreign fighters in Afghanistan was low, simply because of the "amateurishness" of these fighters and their general disregard for Afghan soldiers and military practices; they instead focused on the principles of jihad.[26] However, their relatively minimal experience in battle and supporting roles in the conflict were sufficient to provide new skills, contacts, and motivation to proliferate the struggle for jihad in future conflicts.[27] No longer was the fighting and recruitment contained within the borders of Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan.

Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Iraq

Many of those who chose to continue fighting moved on to Bosnia, where religious issues between Orthodox Christian Serbs and Bosnian Muslims erupted in armed conflict in early 1992.[28] The humanitarian angle was once again exploited by leaders of the movement in order to raise funds for a more "socially acceptable" reason, so as not to alarm the international community—namely the US and EU—to whom a humanitarian cause of conflict is more in line with standards of necessary intervention by Western states (a principle known as liberal imperialism, a core ideal of the EU).[29] There were believed to have been anywhere between 1,000 and 2,000 foreign fighters in Bosnia around this time.[30] Following this, war broke out in Chechnya in late 1994. The majority of foreign fighters who traveled to Chechnya had participated in the wars in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, or Bosnia, evidence that the proliferation of foreign fighting was a means of spreading jihad internationally.[31]

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[25] Atteridge, *Foreign Fighters Post Conflict*, 8.
[26] Atteridge, 9.
[27] Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters*, 63.
[28] Donnelly, *Foreign Fighters in History*, 6.
[29] Cooper, "The new liberal imperialism."
[30] Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters*, 61.
[31] Donnelly, *Foreign Fighters in History*, 11.

The actions in the United States on September 11, 2001 by terrorist group al Qaeda—which had been growing in number and strength since around 1988—were seen by members as a zenith of violent jihad and used to recruit more individuals into the cause. The resulting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq waged by the US (the latter of which attracted between 4,000 and 5,000 foreigners)[32] exacerbated anti-Western sentiment in these fighters and encouraged more radicalized youth to join the jihadist crusade. The web of foreign fighters was continuing to grow, as veterans and new soldiers similarly heeded the call to arms that was becoming increasingly louder with the rise of communications technology. The next large-scale conflict, beginning in Syria in 2011, saw the incitement of the largest number of foreign fighters yet, topping 35,000 throughout the course of the prolonged conflict.[33]

ISIS and Foreign Fighting: "There is no jihad without hijrah"

The advent of a new category of foreign fighters—foreign *terrorist* fighters—resulted from the rise of the latest global terrorism threat born out of similar regional conflict: the Islamic State. The extreme nature of this al Qaeda derivative earned it a reputation of unwavering intensity and brutality in line with its grandiose goal of establishing a recognized Caliphate, or Islamic empire, under the rule of the group's leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.[34] The group was designated a terrorist organization by the US Department of State in late 2004.[35] After the Arab Spring in March 2011 and subsequent military action to regain government control over the country, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (known by the acronym ISIL, or ISIS) became a powerful force opposing the Syrian army by 2014. ISIS took over territory in the region—nearly one-third of Syria and almost half of Iraq by 2015[36]—in order to build their Caliphate, and utilized this tangible strength as a recruitment tool. Estimates suggest that by the peak of ISIS's existence, close to 40,000 foreigners from over 120 countries traveled to the area to join and aid in efforts to seize

[32] Donnelly, 17.
[33] Donnelly, 24.
[34] Al Manasir and Vuçaj, "To what extent does ISIS mark a new stage in the development of Salafi-jihadism?" v.
[35] US Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations."
[36] Wilson Center, "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State."

unified, controlled territory and governing power amidst crumbling state governments in Syria and more broadly in the Middle East.[37,38] Approximately 80% of this total number of foreign fighters joined ISIS during their time in Syria (around 32,000 individuals).[39] Up to 4,761 were women, and up to 4,640 were minors, a larger number than was seen in previous conflicts.[40]

Rather than focusing on driving infidels out of Muslim countries as previous non-State groups had done, ISIS promoted the ideology of jihad through *hijra[h]*, translated as "migration," for a more cohesive yet expansive Muslim state.[41] ISIS' manipulation of this word, which traditionally refers to the journey of the Prophet Muhammed from Mecca to Medina, further enunciated their sinister goals and disregard for Muslim values.[42] A direct call to action was sent across the world in the form of videos, magazines, and other propaganda with the goal of attracting foreign fighters. One featured article in the radical magazine *Dabiq* proclaimed, "There is no life without jihad, and there is no jihad without hijrah," condemning those who did not heed the "holy" call.[43,44] This reenergized movement of volunteer fighters traveling specifically to join a *terrorist* group—as opposed to fighting in a foreign conflict with which one has some personal or religious connection, as was the case in past encounters—prompted the creation of a more specific term: foreign *terrorist* fighters.

A formal definition of foreign terrorist fighters is the subject of legal debate, much like the word terrorism itself. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178, published in September 2014, defines these individuals as those "who travel to a state other than their states of residence…for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training."[45] The EU recognizes this definition as well. As such, anyone associated with ISIS during this period

[37] Donnelly, *Foreign Fighters in History*, 23.
[38] Holmer and Shtuni, *Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative*, 2.
[39] Basit, "Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria – Why So Many?" 4.
[40] Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State," 3.
[41] Waldeck, *The ideology of ISIS –a motivation for Europeans to become foreign fighters?* 57.
[42] Uberman and Shay, "Hijrah According to the Islamic State: An Analysis of Dabiq," 16.
[43] *Dabiq*, "There Is No Life without Jihād and There Is No Jihād without Hijrah," 31.
[44] Waldeck, *The ideology of ISIS –a motivation for Europeans to become foreign fighters?* 59.
[45] United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2178," 2.

and who traveled to physically join the Caliphate would be considered part of this category. Likewise, when these individuals return to their country of residence, they are deemed returning foreign terrorist fighters, herein referred to as "returning FTFs" or simply "returnees."

In addition to providing the terrorist organization with leverage and recruitment power, the vast territory of ISIS opened it up to attack by the US and other countries, leading fairly quickly to its downfall and loss of almost all territory.[46] Even before the group's declared defeat in early 2019,[47] fighters were returning to their home countries for numerous reasons, including (1) true defection or total disengagement from the group, and (2) continued engagement and a motivation to resume terrorist operations in the home country.[48] In response to this influx of FTFs, the European Union, as well as other international organizations and countries, quickly developed policies regarding their return that have continued evolving for the past few years; these policies and the reasoning behind them will be unpacked in the following section.

Finally, Figure 1 contains numerical data on the return of FTFs to individual European Union member countries. According to a report released in October 2017 by The Soufan Group, a global security consultancy headquartered in New York City, official estimates of returning FTFs are updated frequently as data streams in from countries around the world, with the general trend being a constant increase in returnees to their home countries between 2015 and early 2016, at which point the flow slowed significantly.[49,50] Collectively, the European Commission's Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) and other organizations estimated that around 30% of all European Union citizen fighters had returned to their respective countries by July 2017, or around 1500 individuals.[51] However, though the movement of returnees has subsided over the past few

[46] Donnelly, *Foreign Fighters in History*, 24.
[47] Wilson Center, "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State."
[48] Speckhard, Yayla and Shajkovci, "Defected from ISIS or Simply Returned, and For How Long?" 2.
[49] Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate*, 9.
[50] Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Responses to Returnees*, 15.
[51] Van Ginkel and Entenmann, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union*, 3. 3

years, concern and uncertainty surrounding these fighters' motivations and abilities remain high.

EU Member State	Total FTFs	Returned FTFs	% of Total FTFs Who Have Returned**
Austria	296	90	30.4%
Belgium	528	≥ 123	23.3%
Bulgaria	< 10	0	0.0%
Denmark	≥ 145	67	46.2%
Finland	≥ 80	43	53.8%
France	1910	302	15.8%
Germany	≥ 915	300	32.8%
Italy	110	13	11.8%
Netherlands	280	50	17.9%
Spain	204	30	14.7%
Sweden	300	106	35.3%
UK*	850	425	50%
EU Total**	≥ 5600	≥ 1500	≥ 26.8%
Average	469	129	27.7%

Figure 1. EU countries, the estimated number of citizens who traveled to Syria and/or Iraq, the number who have returned, & the percentage of returnees out of total FTFs. All data were accumulated by The Soufan Group & chosen to be presented in this paper because of the recency of reporting.** Dates of reporting returnees all fall between 09/2016 & 10/2017, with the exception of Bulgaria which was reported in 09/2015.[52]
*The United Kingdom is included in these estimates because the country was a member of the EU during the period in which these numbers were reported.
**Total figures for the European Union & all percentages were calculated by the author.

The European Union and Returning FTFs

In this section, I give an overview of the structure of European Union governance and provide a breakdown of the units responsible for law and policy making, particularly

[52] Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate*, 12-13.

those related to counterterrorism efforts and regulations regarding returning FTFs. Following this, I explore legislation on the handling of returnees with a particular interest in the language used within the legislative text itself. Here I illustrate that the EU displays a disproportionate focus on physical attack by juxtaposing the language in these policies with data on the actual prevalence of physical attack—physical damage done to infrastructure or people—perpetrated by foreign fighters who have returned from conflict areas abroad.

European Union Governance Structure

The European Union is a supranational governing body to which 27 Western and Eastern European member countries belong.[53] The foundation of the EU is individual member-state sovereignty with a blurring of internal borders between member states. Members retain autonomy while acknowledging that sharing in decision-making processes through a common institution sustains benefits and provides advantages to the union as a whole. Some matters of common interest to member states are delegated to this overarching governance structure, and decision-making at this level affects each state. Several institutions operate in tandem as an organized governing structure, including the European Parliament, whose delegates are directly elected by the citizens of each member country; the European Council, which consists of members' Heads of State and sets broad direction for EU policy; the Council of the European Union (also known as the Council of Ministers because it is comprised of ministers from each state), in which countries may defend their own interests and is, along with Parliament, the main decision-making body of the EU; and the European Commission, which represents the interests of the EU as a "politically independent executive arm."[54,55] Typically the decision-making process flows such that the European Commission proposes new legislation, the European Parliament and Council passes these regulations, and member states are responsible for implementing

[53] Including the UK increases the total number of member states to 28.
[54] "The European Union: What It Is and What It Does," 10.
[55] European Union, "European Commission."

and adhering to them.[56] Overall, some political areas are under the domain of each member state, while others are under the authority of EU supranational law-making.

Another key piece of the governance structure of the EU is the Court of Justice of the European Union. This body ensures the uniform application and implementation of supranational EU laws and court rulings in each member state, and settles disputes between members and EU institutions.[57] The Court upholds the principle of precedence, or supremacy, of EU law over national law when the two conflict.[58] This principle highlights the influence the EU possesses over member states, while at the same time allowing all states' input to be validated and considered in the decision-making process. In some realms, though, the EU largely defers to the sovereignty of member states. National security is one such realm in which states pass their own legislation, but only when issues pertain more at the member state level as opposed to sweeping issues that encompass the EU as a whole, such as counterterrorism.

An important concept when discussing the ideology and international role held by the EU is "normative power Europe" (NPE). This term refers to the "power over opinion" or "ideological power" evidenced in the EU's "ability to project its core values beyond its borders."[59,60] According to this idea, the EU has an impact on "what is considered appropriate behavior by other actors" across the world.[61] In other words, it is the EU's capability to "shape conceptions of 'normal' in international relations" that allows the organization to remain an influential actor.[62] Rosecrance, as quoted by Manners, states that it is paradoxical that the "continent which once ruled the world through the physical impositions of imperialism" today sets global standards through its normative power of ideology.[63] Recently, NPE has become a topic of debate in the field of international relations, due partly to the question of whether there are double standards in EU policy-

[56] "The European Union: What It Is and What It Does," 10.
[57] European Union, "Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU)."
[58] EUR-Lex, "Primacy of EU Law."
[59] Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" 239.
[60] Scheipers and Sicurelli, "Normative Power Europe: A Credible Utopia?" 435.
[61] Manners and Diez, "Reflecting on Normative Power Europe," 175.
[62] Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" 239.
[63] Manners, 238.

making versus their imposition of standards on other actors.[64] Regardless, EU-level foreign policy is seen to assert a standard-setting identity and continually reestablishes the organization's place as a dominant actor in the international arena.

In NPE, there is an emphasis on "liberal imperialism" or "liberal internationalism" that "calls for…a new doctrine of humanitarian intervention," an ideological emphasis which was exploited by jihadist leaders at the beginning of the aforementioned Middle Eastern regional conflicts.[65] This concept, as argued by Robert Cooper, states that intervention, whether physical or ideological, has replaced colonization as a way for Western states to deal with governmental weakness or instability outside of their borders.[66] In the modern world, this concept manifested in the EU's campaign for the abolition of the death penalty worldwide beginning heavily in the 1980s.[67] The EU sought to globally normalize what to member states was already considered a humanitarian baseline. Thus, it is evident why "humanitarian issues" in Afghanistan and Bosnia to which foreign fighters were responding would not necessarily ring alarm bells, as such action did not contradict the ideals of NPE. However, this status as a champion of human rights introduces an interesting and potentially contradictory distinguishment when juxtaposed with current policy regarding the treatment of returning FTFs, as addressed later in this section.

Though member states have the "front-line responsibility" for their own security, "EU cooperation is essential" in the fight against terrorism.[68] European Union member states have developed their own protocols for and offices in charge of proposing and passing policy addressing the return of foreign fighters. Most states have counterterrorism units, along with domestic law enforcement organizations, that address the threat of terrorism both within their borders and across national borders in Europe. However, terrorism is a unique threat in the way it defies borders and can affect each country equally yet somewhat haphazardly, meaning that it can be difficult to predict or anticipate which states may be victimized by terrorism and when, further supporting the case for an

[64] Manners and Diez, "Reflecting on Normative Power Europe," 173.
[65] Cooper, "The new liberal imperialism."
[66] Cooper, "The new liberal imperialism."
[67] Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" 245.
[68] Migration and Home Affairs, "Counter terrorism and radicalisation."

overarching authority.[69] Because of this cross-border aspect, the EU Parliament and Council *can* adopt common minimum regulations that align with the four pillars of prevention, protection, pursuit, and response, based on Article 83 of the 2012 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).[70] These pillars, adopted in 2005, were the primary goals of improved EU counterterrorism strategy. Prevention refers to the need to address the causes of radicalization and recruitment; protection prioritizes the safety of citizens and infrastructure within the EU; pursuit focuses on the fight against terrorism across borders; and response aims to improve reactionary capabilities should an attack occur.[71]

Article 4(2) of the Treaty on the European Union qualifies this provision, though, by stating that "national security remains the sole responsibility of each Member State," and Article 72 of the TFEU affirms this as well.[72] Thus, while the EU can act in solidarity with member states (stated in Article 222 of the TFEU)[73], matters of national security, like terrorism, are ultimately a state-level concern. European Union-level guidelines or regulations address more big-picture objectives rather than interfering in the operations of domestic law enforcement and criminal justice systems. Often, legislation regarding criminalization and prosecution of terrorists is most likely to differ between countries, based on other criminal justice practices already in place. For example, in French terrorism trials, authorities are able to use special investigative and intelligence gathering techniques in addition to those employed in typical criminal cases, and judges who specialize in terrorism reside over the trial and investigation.[74] The use of unique investigative techniques in terrorism trials is similar in some other states, such as Belgium, but not all.[75]

Such overarching international security issues in which the EU as a whole is involved are handled by The Common Security and Defense Policy, with instruments like the EU

[69] To further this point, the European Commission's Migration and Home Affairs website describes terrorism as "a menace that does not recognise borders and affects countries and people irrespective of their geographical location." (Migration and Home Affairs, "Counter terrorism and radicalisation.")
[70] Immenkamp, et al., *The fight against terrorism*, 4.
[71] European Union, "Counter-terrorism strategy."
[72] Immenkamp, et al., *The fight against terrorism*, 4.
[73] Immenkamp, et al., 4.
[74] Committee of Experts on Terrorism, "Profiles On Counter-Terrorist Capacity: France," 1.
[75] Committee of Experts on Terrorism, "Profiles On Counter-Terrorist Capacity: Belgium," 3.

External Action Service (EEAS, the EU's primary diplomatic arm), as well as several other agencies which contribute to border security, crisis management, etc., underneath it.[76] More specific issues like terrorism require more narrowly focused branches, and thus distinctive counterterrorism measures, offices, and positions have been created in the fight against international terrorism, largely since 2001.

Since counterterrorism efforts are relatively decentralized, multiple bodies of the EU, as well as each member state, play a role in the generation and implementation of such policies. The law enforcement arm of the EU, called Europol, has established the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) as a hub of operational expertise in the field and investigative management upon the request of member states, and to support and coordinate EU regulations regarding terrorism.[77] The Council mandated the creation of the ECTC, and has since strengthened several additional agencies in the area of justice and home affairs. These agencies—such as Eurojust, which deals with especially complicated cross-border crime involving several member states,[78] Frontex, the border control authorities, and CEPOL, or the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training—prioritize the prevention of terrorism as a key responsibility. The Commission's Radicalization Awareness Network harmonizes efforts between the EU and member states, and has internal and external dimensions to comprehensively tackle the threat of terror. The Department of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) is responsible for developing policy on cross-border issues, often specific to judicial and fundamental rights law, and thus plays a central role in establishing counterterrorism policy.[79]

The position of EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator was created by the Council in response to the March 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, and is responsible for managing counterterrorism efforts put forth by the European Council, proposing policy recommendations, and monitoring the implementation of counterterrorism strategy in member countries.[80] The Coordinator—currently Gilles de Kerchove, appointed in 2007—

[76] European External Action Service, "About the European External Action Service (EEAS)."
[77] Europol, "European Counter Terrorism Centre – ECTC."
[78] Eurojust - European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, "What we do."
[79] Council of the European Union, "Justice and Home Affairs Council configuration (JHA)."
[80] Council of the European Union, "Counter-Terrorism Coordinator."

proposed measures regarding FTF returnees as early as 2013, and strategic guidelines which included addressing FTFs were passed in mid-2014.[81] The position also reports specifically on foreign fighters to the European Council via briefs and proposals for future work, and meets with countries outside of the EU to establish wide-reaching strategy.[82] Additionally, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (under the EEAS) oversees counterterrorism efforts alongside other issues of member state and union security.

Evidently, a concerted, coordinated effort is being made across the institutions of the EU in order for comprehensive and effective counterterrorism strategies to be developed and implemented. It is clear that the EU dedicates plentiful resources and labor to addressing the threat of terrorism within their borders and internationally.

States may bolster EU-level policy and utilize tools the EU puts in place, as these are offered as common practices which states can and do incorporate into their own counterterrorism infrastructures. In other words, the EU is responsible for "big picture" regulations, and member states have authority "on the ground" to determine individual legislation that still abides by the EU's rules. Two major cross-border initiatives are the enactment of the EU-wide Passenger Name Record system by JHA, which holds individual countries accountable for detecting and tracking persons who have previously traveled to conflict zones or are likely to for the purpose of joining jihad,[83] and the Schengen Information System, which logs data on those entering and leaving the Schengen region.[84] Many preventative measures and large-scale collaborative work are common across member states, as cooperation with other states and with the EU facilitates more efficient and effective policy development and implementation.

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[81] Bąkowski and Puccio, *Foreign fighters – Member State responses and EU action*, 4.
[82] Council of the European Union, "Counter-Terrorism Coordinator."
[83] Baker-Beall, "The threat of the returning foreign fighter," 438.
[84] According to their website, the Schengen region is the "world's largest visa free zone." This area includes most of the EU, as well as Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, and Lichtenstein. This region has "abolished their internal borders, for the free and unrestricted movement of people" that remain bound by common judicial regulations. (Schengen Visa Info. 2021. "Schengen Area – The World's Largest Visa Free Zone." April 5. https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/schengen-visa-countries-list/.)

Ultimately, EU-level efforts dynamically complement and support the efforts of member states in their responses to attacks and threats. Individual countries are able to propose and pass separate legislation according to their rules of governance, and also must abide by EU regulations that address terrorism at the supranational level, which should not conflict with national policy anyway. Member state and EU-level policies work cooperatively to provide enhanced safeguards against terrorism and actively respond to evolving threats.

European Union- and Member State-Level Legislation on Returning FTFs

In May 2013, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator released a report that proffered four distinct areas in which the EU could support the counterterrorism efforts of its member countries: prevention of radicalization, exchange of information regarding suspicious travel, criminal justice responses to returning fighters, and cooperation with outside countries.[85] The report described the travel and return of jihadists as a "serious problem for European internal security" and stated that "urgent action must be taken."[86] It proposed twenty-two "orientations," or guidelines, that urged several different branches and leadership figures in the EU to become involved in and promote counterterrorism measures developing at the time that addressed returnees. The measures also reiterated the necessity of cooperation and information sharing, and invited several agencies and countries (the Netherlands, Frontex, the High Representative of Common Foreign and Security Policy, for example) to present reports on the efficacy of border controls, existing legislation, and "risk indicators used to detect foreign fighters."[87] During 2013, EU authorities solidified the issue of foreign fighters as a policy priority in response to the influx of Western European citizens traveling to Syria and Iraq to join jihad amidst uprisings and ISIS' subsequent increase in power.[88]

[85] Scherrer, "The return of foreign fighters to EU soil," 6.
[86] EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, *Foreign fighters and returnees from a counter-terrorism perspective*, 1.
[87] EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 4.
[88] Bakker, Paulussen and Entenmann, "Returning Jihadist Foreign Fighters," 12.

In recent years, EU-level authorities have coordinated efforts between member states in the four areas listed above in order to more efficiently and effectively address the increased attention on the return of FTFs and subsequent EU-wide unease due to the issue.[89] As stated in the "2017 Annual Report on the Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy," the view of EU-level leaders is that "no single Member State alone is able to tackle the challenges we face today," and that "common EU action" is needed to protect member states' interests, a sentiment that has been evoked in conflict situations for decades.[90]

The passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2178 in 2014 triggered an updated discussion in the Council of the EU as well,[91] which produced a report detailing the urgency with which UNSCR 2178 should be implemented by states.[92] Travel bans and other preventative protocol were put into practice within a few years; implementation of these acts of legislation was required of member states. However, EU policymakers never enacted legislation requiring the revocation of FTFs' citizenship upon their return—such actions may have been thought to overstep the bounds of EU-level power and were at the discretion of each state. Instead, a major push for criminalization of terrorist-related travel and training, travel ban legislation, and border strengthening protocols was seen in many members states as well as in the EU as a whole.[93,94]

Member state policies on the return of foreign fighters vary, though generally fall into three main categories: stripping returnees of citizenship, allowing FTFs to return under certain conditions such as prosecution upon return, or repatriation. Figure 2 presents simplified details of member states' policy stances on the return of foreign fighters. While not a comprehensive list of all EU member state policies, these are representative examples of common policies implemented at the state level.

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[89] Bąkowski and Puccio, "'Foreign fighters': Member States' responses and EU action in an international context," 1.
[90] European Parliament, *Annual report on the implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy*.
[91] Baker-Beall, "The threat of the returning foreign fighter," 442.
[92] EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, *Foreign fighters and returnees: discussion paper*, 2.
[93] Baker-Beall, "The threat of the returning foreign fighter," 442.
[94] Immenkamp, et al., *The fight against terrorism*, 7.

EU Member State	Revocation of citizenship	Repatriation	Allows return with stipulations
Austria	✓* *Unless doing so leaves person stateless (those with single nationality)[95]		
Belgium		✓* *Repatriates children	
Bulgaria			✓* *Arrest upon return
Denmark (response changed significantly since 2015)[96]	✓* *Unless doing so leaves person stateless (those with single nationality)[97]		
Finland		✓* *Selective repatriation of children of fighters	
France			✓* *Usually detained and questioned upon return; state prefers judicial outsourcing to Iraq
Germany	✓* *Unless doing so leaves person stateless (those with single nationality)		
Italy		✓	
Netherlands			✓* *Accept FTFs if return themselves
Spain			✓* *Criminalization and prosecution upon return
Sweden			✓* *Accept FTFs if return themselves
UK	✓* *Issues TEOs (temporary exclusion orders) and can revoke citizenship in dual nationals[98]		

[95] Global Legal Research Center, *Treatment of Foreign Fighters in Selected Jurisdictions*, 10.
[96] Bąkowski and Puccio, "'Foreign fighters': Member States' responses and EU action in an international context," 1.
[97] Reuters, "Denmark to strip foreign fighters of Danish citizenship."
[98] Dawson, "Returning Terrorist Fighters: Briefing Paper," 7-10.

Figure 2. Member state-level policy regarding the return of foreign terrorist fighters from Syria and Iraq. All country legislation data obtained from GWU Program Report[99] and cross-referenced with Law of Congress report,[100] except Austria (see in-table citation). Additional details regarding data have been obtained from sources cited beside each respective data point.

As demonstrated, member states are able to develop customized policy that best addresses the perceived needs of the country itself, taking into account the number of returnees, attacks that have been perpetrated by terrorists within the country, public opinion on the issues, and existing policy. This, in combination with EU-level policy that has evolved alongside member states' authority on national security issues, makes up the bulk of legislative, judicial, and preventative action addressing FTFs returning to EU home countries.

Here it is apparent that there is a discrepancy between the humanitarian-focused normative power status that the EU strives to uphold and the treatment of *citizens* of its member states. While not every state has implemented policy preventing the return of FTFs or revoking their citizenship, as an overarching governing body with the authority to step in if necessary, the EU is unexpectedly (in the context of NPE) allowing these policies to be enacted. This legislation appears inconsistent with the ideology portrayed in liberal internationalism as well as the more general standard-setting nature of the EU, which is indicative of alternative factors influencing the policy-making process both in the EU and member states.

Policy Language Regarding Returnees

The overarching approach of the EU to the general threat of terrorism and to returning FTFs more specifically is to emphasize the physical threat, according to Christopher Baker-Beall's assessment of the security situation revolving around returning FTFs, which highlights the urgency of the matter and possibly extreme measures to which governing bodies may turn in order to protect citizens from danger posed by extremist

[99] Hoffman and Furlan, "Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters," 16-19.
[100] Global Legal Research Center, *Treatment of Foreign Fighters in Selected Jurisdictions*, 10.

actors.[101] Imperative in any examination of the legitimacy of existing policy is the specific language used in the legislation itself. Along with aggressive measures to keep former FTFs out of the country or at least be prosecuted if allowed in, language used in the legislation iterates a sense of physical danger posed by these returnees. Threat of physical attack is frequently listed first as a reason for implementation of certain policy. More intangible threats, such as radicalization and proliferating jihadist ideology, are often lower on the list of concerns addressed by policy. A few representative examples of policy language are provided below.

An illustrative example of attack-focused policy language is found in the four pillars of The Counter-Terrorism Agenda of the EU, published in 2020: anticipate, respond, protect, and prevent.[102] The first three are aimed at physical threat detection, threat assessment, prosecution, protection of critical infrastructure, and restriction of weapons. Prevention touches upon the underlying causes of radicalization, such as online content and networking, but is overshadowed by the stress on physical attack. This disproportionate emphasis is indicative of attack-focused policy priorities.

In a 2019 briefing before the European Parliament, the European Parliamentary Research Service presented current data on the fight against terrorism. In the section entitled "State of Play," the authors list groups of terrorist actors that pose a threat to EU member states. First on this list are FTFs, described using the following language[103]:

> With the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State (ISIL/Da'esh), thousands of young Europeans left for conflict zones in Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIL/Da'esh. Some of them came back to organise and carry out deadly attacks on European soil, such as the November 2015 attacks in Paris.

Evidently, threat of physical attack is the foremost concern pertaining to the return of FTFs. The Global Counterterrorism Forum, of which the EU is part, produced "The

[101] Baker-Beall, "The threat of the returning foreign fighter," 438.
[102] European Union, "A Counter-Terrorism Agenda For The EU," 1-4.
[103] Immenkamp, et al., *The fight against terrorism*, 2.

Hague–Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon" in 2014. In the second paragraph of the nine-page report, the authors sought to describe the threat posed by returning FTFs, using the following language[104] (emphasis added):

> Subsequent to their return, whether operating independently ("lone actors") or as a part of a group, *there is a risk that FTFs can commit terrorist acts or promote violence*, provide guidance and operational expertise, raise funds, and/or serve as recruiters to radicalize and more broadly encourage others to violence in their State of residence or nationality…

Once again, perpetration of terrorist acts is the first concern noted. The 2020 Counter-Terrorism Agenda referenced above also contains attack-centered language in addition to the focus of the four main security pillars. In the second paragraph of the Introduction to this 25-page agenda, the following statement is made regarding the broad threat of terrorism, specifically the "jihadist threat from or inspired by Daesh, al-Qaeda and their affiliates," and the EU's role in countering extremism and protecting its citizens from attack[105] (emphasis added):

> The *recent spate of attacks* on European soil have served as a sharp reminder that terrorism remains a real and present danger. As this threat evolves, so too must our cooperation to counter it…Citizens have the *right to feel safe in their own homes and streets*, as well as on the internet. The EU has a key role to play in helping to deliver that security.

This emphasis on recent attacks, the most recent of which was in 2016, suggests not only that the threat of violent attack has remained, but also that mitigating this risk should

[104] Global Counterterrorism Forum, *The Hague – Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices*, 1.
[105] European Commission, "A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU," 1.

be the number-one priority in counterterrorism policy. This weighting appears highly disproportionate when discussed alongside data on physical attacks (discussed in the following section), implying that other factors are at play in policy making. In other words, the aggressiveness of policy aimed at deterring physical attacks on home soil is suggestive of multiple factors influencing the EU policy-making process, since it appears disproportionate to the data concerning the prevalence of such attacks.

These examples of policy language reflect what appears to be the most salient concern in policy-makers' minds: the physical threat of attack by FTFs on home soil. While certainly a relevant and pressing concern, should it be framed in a way that diminishes the relative importance of other issues, as seen in these policy examples? Next, I present data on physical attacks perpetrated by FTFs who have returned to their home countries, drawing on empirical figures to answer the question of whether this policy emphasis is completely justified by the violent actions of returned FTFs.

FTF-Perpetrated Attacks

Here I summarize available data on the threat of physical attack perpetrated on the soil of a returnee's home country against fellow citizens. It has proven difficult for scholars and policymakers alike to obtain accurate data regarding the background of some perpetrators, and thus what is presented is not an exhaustive list or complete interpretation of all FTF-executed attacks. Despite this, some conclusions can be drawn from the data available at this time regarding FTF returnees from Syria and attacks directed, inspired, or claimed by ISIS.

Between 1993 (the first US World Trade Center bombing) and the end of 2018, there were 124 radical Islamist terrorist attacks on people and infrastructure in countries considered Western, both geographically compared to the Middle Eastern region and ideologically as assessed by many in the Muslim faith.[106] Most attacks during these 25 years were directly planned and executed or inspired by al Qaeda; I will focus on the more recent

[106] All data in this section, unless denoted by an additional superscript, were compiled by E. Pokalova. Further interpretation and percentages are the work of the author. (Pokalova, *Returning Islamist Foreign Fighters*, Appendix).

wave of returnees from the Syrian and Libyan conflicts, as these are the issues to which EU and member state policy initiatives are most explicitly responding. Thus, out of the 93 attacks concluded by authorities to have been planned or executed by Islamic extremists and that occurred in 2014 or later, 6 (or 6.45%) involved returned FTFs who had participated with ISIS abroad or were otherwise inspired by the group.

The Jewish Museum shooting in Brussels, Belgium on May 24, 2014 was the first attack on European soil to be carried out by a foreign terrorist fighter who had returned from Syria. Mehdi Nemmouche, a French national,[107] was directed by ISIS to execute the attack, which killed four people. An attack on the Thalys train traveling in France on August 21, 2015 was the next attack by a Syria returnee, and thankfully no fatalities occurred. The perpetrator, Ayoub El Khazzani, was also directed by ISIS to carry out the assault; however, Khazzani was a Moroccan national and not a citizen of the EU, but was reportedly living in Brussels at the time of the attack after extensive travel throughout Europe.[108] Deadly attacks in Paris (counted in this analysis as one incident due to the events being perpetrated by one group operating in multiple locations in the city) on November 13, 2015 involved seven Syria returnees, most of whom were French or Belgian citizens (two were Iraqi),[109] and was again ISIS-directed. The largest of these FTF attacks in terms of fatalities, the shootings and suicide bombings left 130 people dead.[110] Three coordinated attacks (again counted as one incident for the aforementioned reason) on the Brussels airport and nearby Maalbeek Metro station happened on March 22, 2016, resulting in 32 civilian deaths as well as 3 attackers, all Belgian nationals.[111] Yet again, ISIS members directly influenced the Syria returnees to perpetrate the violence.[112]

Though not perpetrated by Syria returnees, in the following year, two attacks occurred in the UK, both committed by returnees from Libya. The Manchester Arena

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[107] BBC, "Brussels Jewish Museum murders: Mehdi Nemmouche jailed for life."
[108] Bittermann and Jones, "France train attack: What we know about suspect Ayoub El Khazzani?"
[109] BBC, "Paris attacks: Who were the attackers?"
[110] BBC, "Paris attacks: What happened on the night."
[111] DW Akademie, "Brussels terror attacks: 10 people to stand trial over 2016 bombings."
[112] Had all of these events been considered separate attacks, FTF-perpetrated attacks would totaled 13 (6 in Paris in 2015). This means that 14% of terrorist-perpetrated attacks between 2014-2018 were committed by returned FTFs. The percentage of individual returned FTFs who perpetrated violent attacks remains the same as reported above.

bombing and London Bridge car explosion are the most recent attacks by returned FTFs in the EU. Though these perpetrators had returned from the Libyan conflict zone rather than Syria, ISIS claimed both attacks, and the perpetrators were EU nationals (both from the UK), so they are included in this analysis.[113,114]

If all of the approximately 1,500 FTFs who traveled and fought in the Syrian conflict and then returned to the EU could be designated a jihadist and thus a foreign terrorist fighter, these attacks involved a total of 14, or 0.93%, of them (this figure includes the two Libya returnees). This "blowback rate," defined by Hegghammer as the proportion of fighters who return to their home country and plan and execute attacks there, is the concern of EU member states, despite it being "very low indeed," or lower than one would imagine when considering the number of foreign fighters, their violent histories, and the anticipations of some policymakers and analysts in recent years.[115] Interestingly, this important figure is not highlighted in policy rhetoric; rather, vague language defining the "threat" appears to suffice.

Returned FTFs are also spread across the entire EU, not just in these countries where attacks occurred, which further emphasizes the difference in the rate of violent attacks by FTFs compared to those committed by member state citizens who are not associated with terrorist traveling. As of 2017, FTFs had returned to 11 countries in the EU sample presented, but FTF-perpetrated attacks occurred in only 3 of these states. Thus, the rate of violent FTF attack in 8 countries is zero, compared to a non-zero violent crime rate in all of these countries.

In comparison with this rate of violence by returned FTFs, aggregate violent crime rates from 2018 (which include intentional homicide, assault, sexual violence, rape, and sexual assault) committed by nationals in the three countries in which FTF-perpetrated attacks occurred are as follows: 0.693% in Belgium, 0.513% in France, and 1.403% in the UK.[116] These rates are not considerably different from the rate of violent attack by returnees,

[113] BBC, "Manchester Arena attack: Hashem Abedi jailed for minimum 55 years."
[114] BBC, "Fishmongers' Hall: MI5 'had intelligence suggesting Usman Khan had been plotting.'"
[115] Hegghammer and Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," 20.
[116] Eurostat, "Recorded offences by offence category - police data."

which may supplement the argument that there is not an exceptional danger posed by returnees when compared to that already seen in home countries.

Additionally, the recidivism rates of criminal offenders, both violent and nonviolent, in several EU member states can be compared to the blowback rate of returnees, as these repeat offenders had previously been convicted of a crime, which can be likened to the history of FTFs abroad as a "first conviction." Based on data from 2005 and reported in 2015, recidivism rates within a two-year period are as follows: Denmark, 29%; Finland, 36%; Norway, 20%; Sweden, 43%; and Northern Ireland, 47%. More recent member state data, collected in 2013, shows that Ireland has a rate of 51% in a three-year span, and the UK has a rate of 45% in just one year.[117] Thus, even when partitioning violent versus nonviolent reoffenders represented by these statistics, the blowback rate of terrorist offenders who have returned from conflict zones abroad remains contextually low, which further supports the notion that there is an overstated response by the EU to the physical threat of returnees.

A Potential Mismatch Between Stated Policy Motivations and Threat

Altogether, these data suggest that an additional consideration is involved in decision- and policy-making at both the EU- and state-level, as language used in such policy is *disproportionately focused on the physical threat* and highly contrasts the factual threat indicated by the data. By juxtaposing policy language and number of physical attacks perpetrated by returnees, it becomes clear that there is a mismatch between the threat suggested by aggressive policy wording and the threat of attack as backed by data. Such emphasis on this threat, potentially at the expense of focus on other, more dangerous threats (radicalization, fundraising, etc.), suggests that there is another underlying element in the response to returning FTFs that manifests in an outwardly strong fear of physical attack and disproportionate emphasis on prevention of this act.

Certainly, the time of publication of such EU reports matters—as we progress farther from the incidence of attack, the more unnecessary a primary focus on physical

[117] Fazel and Wolf, "A Systematic Review of Criminal Recidivism Rates Worldwide: Current Difficulties and Recommendations for Best Practice," 4.

attack appears. Reports from 2014 to 2018 (the year of the first EU attack and the year after the last confirmed returnee-perpetrated attack, respectively) have a more significant purpose in highlighting this risk, but more recent reports may do better to highlight other risk factors at play in the return of FTFs since the prevalence of this threat has not manifested as once expected.

Concluding the presence of this mismatch is certainly not meant to discount or underestimate the physical and mortal damage returnees are capable of doing. A single attack is too many, and the value of human life cannot be defined in these terms. The potential of a physical attack undoubtedly warrants policy implementation to prevent this from occurring. However, security scholars like Thomas Renard assert that this danger should not be "overstated…[but] not underestimated either"[118]—there is risk in both. Thus, in addition to the threat of physical attack, I propose that there is another reason for member states' and the EU's forceful responses. Framing the return of FTFs as a physical threat can be explained as an *ontological security response* by the EU in order to *protect the institution's and member states' sense of "self" and identity* when facing the return of FTFs.

The Ontological Security Threat of Returnees

How can it be that the EU, a supranational organization devoted to promoting democratic values as a normative power in the global community, has developed policies that turn its own citizens into stateless persons beyond the protection of its laws? I propose that this drift from typical "NPE-approved" policy is a response to an existential insecurity caused by the return of FTFs to EU member states. These FTFs were, and still are, citizens of the EU, and thus shared in the collective identity. Do they still share this identity, or has it changed based on their decision to leave and their experiences abroad? How can they as individuals threaten the stability of the identity of the EU, a massive transnational institution? These are essential questions for understanding the response of the EU to the return of FTFs, and the answers may lie in the process by which the EU navigates threats to its identity.

[118] Renard, "How to handle returning foreign fighters: policies and challenges," 1.

This section summarizes background knowledge on the nature of ontological security in international politics and the concept of securitization theory. These ideas and how they are manifested within the security sphere of the EU provide the conceptual framework for my argument. I argue that the EU has securitized the issue of returning FTFs and thus its response is not subject to typical democratic oversight of normal politics. I also specify the reasoning behind my argument that ontological insecurity is an underlying factor in the EU's response to the return of FTFs (securitization), and that this concept provides a potential explanation for the disproportionate reaction to the threat this group poses.

Ontological (In)security and Securitization Theories

Ontological security is a budding concept in international relations; it has become more popular in recent years as scholars use it to describe the security-seeking behavior of states in a theoretical way that involves "security not of the body but of the self,"[119] which has not previously been deeply investigated in this field. The concept was originally used to describe the internal, psychological sentiment of individuals facing the "hazards of life" and dealing with these issues with a firm sense of his or her own identity and the identities of others.[120] Depending on an individual's sense of security in his or her own identity and sense of self and place in the world, though, anxieties and dangers may not be dealt with appropriately. It has been proposed that states also experience this sense of agency, and participate in security-seeking behaviors in order to establish and maintain their identities relative to others.[121] States may suffer existential anxiety similarly to individuals when instability is introduced into the established relations between actors, or when a state's own sense of identity is threatened with volatility and uncertainty.

Ontological security, and in turn identity stability, is a constant, basic need both for individuals and for states. An essential component of identity constancy is that it can be sustained by the state's actions indefinitely. Amidst change in relations with other actors

[119] Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," 344.
[120] Laing, *The Divided Self*, 39.
[121] Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," 342.

or threats to the state, chosen actions will either "reproduce or contradict" identity, and thus identity continually influences the response of a state, which is a logical conclusion.[122] Figure 3 provides a visualization for this process of identity and its interaction with the response of the state to other actors.

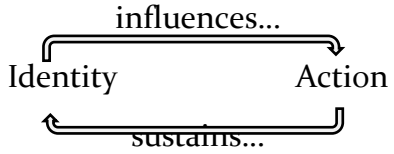

Figure 3. Graphic representation of the "dynamic process" of identity. Adapted from Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," 344.

Change inherently disrupts the stability of an established routine. Ontological *in*security in a state, then, is caused by fluctuations and uncertainty in relationships with "significant others"—because identity is "formed and sustained through relationships"[123]—and the subsequent upheaval (or threatened upheaval) of state identity. According to Mitzen, this refers to the "deep, incapacitating state" of uncertainty regarding whether or not to confront or ignore different dangers.[124] The state's sense of agency is in turmoil; there is a lack of confidence in the path forward when dealing with threats to security, ideology, etc. When uncertainty persists and "an actor has no idea what to expect," doubt reigns in decisions on how to address the future.[125] Identity, while it should guide action, is not helpful now, which perpetuates the uncertainty felt. Logically, actors attempt to mitigate these uncertainties and regain a sense of stability in their identities, their relationships, and their sense of place within the world.

If states can be posited as seekers of ontological security, so too can the EU, which is an important actor on the world stage. The EU experiences ontological stressors in many ways, such as economic downturns, migration issues, and the rise of far-right ideology to name a few, despite its purpose of maintaining a collective identity.[126] The organization has

[122] All information in this paragraph from Mitzen, 344.
[123] Mitzen, 342.
[124] Mitzen, 345.
[125] Mitzen, 342.
[126] Mitzen, "Anxious community: EU as (in)security community," 394.

appropriately been deemed an "anxious community" in today's world because of these threats to cohesion and identity and subsequent response by the EU.[127] These threats cause ontological anxiety by introducing uncertainty into how to proceed in mitigating the negative effects of such issues, which may not be adequately addressed with previous methods, thus challenging the sense of identity and competency typically upheld by the EU.

The need for a stable identity is often amplified in times of uncertainty or times during which potentially threatening circumstances, such as the unpredictable return of FTFs, are beyond the control of the state.[128] One way states try to alleviate the stress of uncertainty is through "securitization." Securitization theory in the field of international relations refers, at its most fundamental level, to the process by which security threats are defined as such by governing authorities. According to the theory, the focuses of national security policy are "not a natural given," but rather are called into being by those in power in a state or organization.[129] Security issues are based largely on a perceived need to heighten the response to or awareness of a particular threat, essentially moving the issue into a special categorization of "existential threat."[130]

The process of securitization is diagrammed in Figure 4. An issue is framed as a security threat by an actor, often a government figure or other authoritative group or individual with stakes in the security of the state or institution. This framing is portrayed to an audience relevant to the actor; i.e., if the securitizing actor is part of a government, her audience may be other members of the parliamentary body or the general public. At this point, the audience must "accept" the framing of the issue as a security threat, so that the move towards securitization may continue in a tangible, policy-based way.[131] Securitization theory has provided a framework for empirical analyses of how political actors gain the ability to place certain security issues "on the docket," so to speak.[132]

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[127] Mitzen, "Anxious community," 394.
[128] Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security," 748.
[129] Eroukhmanoff, "Securitisation Theory," 104.
[130] Eroukhmanoff, "Securitisation Theory," 106.
[131] Sjöstedt, "Securitization Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis."
[132] Sjöstedt, "Securitization Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis."

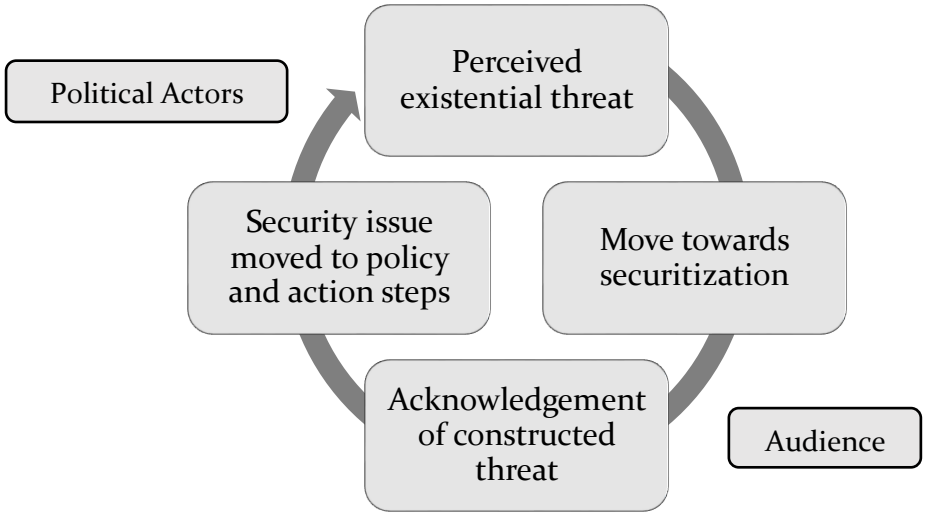

Figure 4. Outline of the process of securitization. Cycle graphic adapted from Sjöstedt, "Securitization Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis."

The intersubjective nature of these security decisions intensifies unavoidable imbalances in power dynamics between actors. For example, policy implemented as a result of the "War on Terror" launched by the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 asserted that terrorism was a global threat and designated essentially the entire Muslim community a "dangerous Other" in the eyes of the US and many other nations.[133] This exemplifies one major facet of securitization: the labeling of an "Other" to further divide "them" from "us." An "Other" could viably be another state, a material object, or a group of substate actors; in other words, it can be defined as whatever the referent object (i.e., the actor whose existence is being protected; in this case, the EU) deems threatening. This distinction contributes to the justification of securitizing an issue, almost as a self-fulfilling prophecy in the way that "if we define 'them' as a security threat *and* as being unlike 'us,' they will be more easily viewed as a valid danger, resulting in their actions becoming more worthy of our aggressive response." The imbalance created by an us-versus-them mindset leads to shifted power relations between the securitizing actors and the securitized object, creating a rift that further exacerbates the issue.

[133] Eroukhmanoff, "Securitisation Theory," 104.

Another major facet of securitization is the validated use of "extraordinary measures" to tackle security threats. When the government of a member state or the EU designates a threat, resources can readily be allocated toward designing policy and making maneuvers to alleviate it.[134] That is to say, securitization justifies or rationalizes an increase in state power and a parallel decrease in democratic norms, often through the authorization of actions which in normal circumstances may be "deemed undemocratic." Guantanamo Bay and the use of torture, disregard for citizen privacy in the name of surveillance, and the incidence of abnormally indiscriminate drone strikes are recognizable and illustrative examples of intensified US policy measures that resulted from the securitization of terrorism. Exceptions to typical protocol and adoption of extreme means exemplify the extraordinary nature of the threat and suggest an instability felt by the state in their own existence, which is threatened by the existence of the "Other." In sum, state reactions to perceived threats under the umbrella of securitization usually suspend typical action-planning and err on the side of excess as opposed to overly conservative, in an effort to avoid this existential anxiety.[135]

Securitization plays an important role in the preservation of European normative power. The stable identity of the EU is incredibly important in dealing with other countries, as it must have a firm set of values and principles with which to define its relationships with others. As ontological insecurity grows, states attempt to "securitize subjectivity" in an effort to further control uncertainty and search for a singular stable identity.[136] In other words, states desire to take all subjectivity, or guesswork or uncertainty, out of the threat they are facing. This process involves a reinvigorated attempt to confirm identity traits within the state or organization, leading to a more comfortable definition of self and a "juxtaposition of these [traits] to others' [traits]."[137] Again, an "Other" must be continually defined in response to changing threats.

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[134] Sjöstedt, "Securitization Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis."
[135] All information in this paragraph from Eroukhmanoff, "Securitisation Theory."
[136] Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security," 749.
[137] Kinnvall, 749.

It is interesting to note here that migration is not necessarily seen as a physical threat to EU or member state security, but is still a securitized issue, further evidence that there need not be an overwhelming physical threat element in securitization. The EU presents a unique case of a relatively long history of peace within the region paralleled by constantly experiencing stressors both within and outside of its borders.[138] Still, with the increase of ontological insecurity comes the increase in the use of securitization as a means of mitigating potential threats with overwhelming measures. This may contribute to the EU's ability to maintain political and militaristic peace within its borders and in its dealings with many other countries.

In short, the process of securitization occurs via the framing of a perceived threat as a security issue by authoritative actors, followed by the acceptance of this designation by the relevant audience. This opens the possibility for extreme measures to be taken to address the securitized threat, often leading to a suspension of typical democratic means of national security. Securitization plays a large role in the development and modification of identity within a state or supranational institution. The issues a government chooses to securitize delineate its relationships with other actors in the world, and for the EU, reaffirms its place as a normative power.

These concepts of ontological security and securitization offer a potential answer to the question of how EU identity may be threatened by powers much weaker than the supranational institution and why it responds with such force. Securitization is one factor in EU identity continuity, as it perpetuates definitions of "us" and "Other" that are imperative in stabilizing a potentially threatened group identity. It also importantly decreases the ontological insecurity felt in times of uncertainty and rationalizes the use of extraordinary means to do so. This will be unpacked in the final section alongside the conclusion of my argument that ontological security is an underlying factor invoked in policy decisions regarding returning FTFs.

[138] Mitzen, "Anxious community: EU as (in)security community," 393-394.

Returning FTFs: An Existential Threat to the Ontological Insecurity of the EU

I propose that ontological insecurity is caused in EU member states and, in turn, the EU as an institution, by the return of FTFs. Foreign terrorist fighters returning to their home countries after fighting jihad in Syria or other Middle Eastern countries are labeled as the "Other," or even the "Stranger-other,"[139] because of their potentially misplaced identity resulting from their time and purpose abroad.

Leduc states that FTFs challenge the "conventional notion" of the relationship between EU authority and EU citizens and thus generate instability surrounding the "fundamental understanding of state authority."[140] In other words, it is possible that authorities no longer feel stable in their roles, since these citizens demonstrate through their actions that they may no longer respect the authority of the EU. This captures the roots of the ontological insecurity dilemma that is produced when FTFs attempt to return home. This friction creates discomfort on the part of the EU and member state governments, and policies are designed in order to address this. However, feelings of ontological insecurity are not often consciously considered; rather, seeking security is an unconscious, ongoing process.[141] Therefore, I have proposed that the aggressive, physical-attack focused rhetoric of EU and member state policies is a sort of coping mechanism that indirectly addresses the ontological insecurity the EU possesses in this situation without using that precise language.

In my view, this insecurity would be more openly demonstrated by policies aimed at dissuading further radicalization of individuals in home states at the hands of returnees, rather than policies focused on physical attack, as the former addresses the intangible instability that could be caused by their return. While policy rhetoric focusing on this relatively intangible threat does exist, these policies are not the foremost concern of the EU, as demonstrated previously, further suggesting that it may be simpler to address physical security concerns as opposed to the intangible, not-fully-understood nature of

[139] Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security," 749.
[140] Leduc, "The ontological threat of foreign fighters," 8.
[141] Mitzen, "Anxious community: EU as (in)security community," 397.

ontological insecurity in the EU. Thus, one of the reasons behind aggressive physical attack-focused policy against returnees may be this sense of insecurity, though it is not typically referenced as a motivating factor.

The maxim "never again" has been noted as a particularly relevant narrative of the EU, in response to past human rights abuses; however, policy against the return of FTFs has been described as such a modern-day abuse.[142] The revocation of citizenship, while ultimately not leaving individuals stateless, appears to be a contradiction against the ideology of the EU as imposing humanitarian norms on the rest of the world. The ethical dimension of this issue is not the focus of this analysis, but this factor seems also to contribute to a sense of anxiety and tension between (1) normative power of the EU and its commitment to human rights and (2) the fear of attack if FTFs were permitted to return—a tension which could realistically and legitimately induce ontological insecurity. This extreme response that directly challenges one of the core tenets of EU ideology is highly indicative of such existential insecurity.

Conclusion

The recent phenomenon of FTFs returning to their home countries presented the EU, as well as other nations worldwide, with an unprecedented security challenge. Policy decisions centered largely around the physical, tangible threat of such individuals who left their home countries and traveled to commit jihad in conflict zones like Syria and Iraq. However, I have demonstrated that there is a mismatch between the realized threat of physical attack by returned FTFs, as shown in empirical attack data, and the heightened threat perception suggested by EU policy rhetoric dealing with the return of these individuals. This implies additional underlying factors in such policy decisions. Based on the information presented in this paper, it seems as if we cannot fully understand the phenomenon of FTFs or improve the EU's and member states' responses without understanding the reasoning behind securitization and the impact of ontological insecurity on the authority of the state.

[142] Mitzen, "Anxious community: EU as (in)security community," 394.

Securitizing the issue of returning FTFs allows legislators within the EU to employ extreme measures to tackle the threat. As a security-seeking actor, the EU strives to avoid uncertainty, so that the identity of the governing institution and the union as a whole remains stable and consistent. I argue that returning FTFs produce anxiety; they are both a citizen and an "Other," the latter of which is an existential threat that challenges the EU's self-identity as a normative power. The EU's policy response is reflective of its experience of ontological insecurity, though it manifests through indirect aggression rather than explicitly evoking insecurity as a reason behind the decisions made.

The recognition of ontological insecurity as a result of the presence and subsequent securitization of returning FTFs is vital and can provide a more comprehensive perception of the EU response to not only this security threat but to related issues like domestic terrorism, ex-prisoners, and migration-related security matters. However, looking solely at ontological insecurity certainly cannot account for the EU's entire response. Rather, it is a crucial factor in the holistic picture of the security response to FTFs. I chose to address this aspect in my paper because it is largely absent in the literature surrounding FTFs returning to the EU, but there is evidence to support the hypothesis of its influence on related policy. On the other hand, some policy reports do stress ontological insecurity as a factor, though without referencing the exact term because, as mentioned, ontological security-seeking behavior is chiefly subconscious. One example found in an ex-post evaluation of the response to FTFs published by the European Parliamentary Research Service in 2018 stated the following[143]:

> First, they are perceived as a security threat. During their stay in conflict zones, they acquire combat experience, which prompts fears that they may perpetuate the terrorist threat to the EU through radicalising, fundraising and facilitation activities.

[143] Scherrer, "The return of foreign fighters to EU soil," 5.

The mention of radicalization, financing, and other facilitation activities as the primary fears resulting from FTFs' return suggests a more upfront acknowledgement that there is more than a physical threat. Highlighting these threats as opposed to physical threat may be indicative of ontological insecurity being generated, though a thorough exploration of the reasoning behind such rhetoric would need to be done in a subsequent study in order to come to such a conclusion. In addition to this investigation, follow-up analyses may be done once data has been released on the effects of the aforementioned policies on both the home country population and the FTFs affected by it. Also, generation of ontological insecurity in citizens living in EU member states could be assessed to determine the level of comfort and stability offered by these governmental policies. Ultimately, only time will tell whether these policies are effective in addressing the security issues presented by returnees, both physical and ontological. Until that point, a more thorough understanding of the significant role ontological security plays in the securitization of such issues is imperative. This paper provides a first attempt at such an understanding.

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